Chapter 1

Introduction

Consumers' daily behaviors are driven by their goals. These goals can be set by consumers themselves, such as to lose weight, finish a dissertation, or save for a vacation, or by others, such as companies that remind consumers of certain needs (e.g., advertising reminders such as "Hungry? Grab a Snickers!" or reward programs). In turn, consumers use various products and services to pursue their goals. When they choose which goods or brands to buy and in what quantity, consumers do so on account of their goals. These situations of course differ in various ways, but one thing they all have in common is that they require consumers to control and regulate their own behavior in the face of distractions, temptations, or lack of motivation. Determining how consumers reach their goals and adopt behaviors and decisions that help them reach their objectives may seem straightforward, but little research has clarified the underlying processes by which people pursue goals in a consumer context or described how the consumer context might influence self-regulated goal pursuit, even though motivational and goal-related concepts abound in marketing literature (Baumgartner and Pieters 2008; Kopetz et al. 2012).

This dissertation addresses this gap. Therefore, it starts with a brief overview of literature on goals and self-regulation to elaborate a theoretical framework for my research. I begin by defining self-regulation and distinguishing its deliberate and implicit forms. Most recent research tends to focus on deliberate aspects of self-regulation, paying less attention to its automatic elements. I then zoom in on the role of extrapersonal, environmental factors in self-regulation, something that has received scant attention in previous research. Thereafter, I introduce three empirical chapters that cover three domains in which implicit self-regulatory processes likely affect motivated, goal-directed consumer behavior[1]: (a) the self in relation to time and space, (b) the self in relation to the physical world, and (c) the self in relation to itself. In all three domains, I show how the retail environment influences non-volitional self-regulation and goal pursuit. In so doing, my research offers novel insights into how consumers implicitly regulate their behavior and adds to our understanding of how consumer cognition and behavior shape, and are shaped by, the consumer context.

1.1 | Self-Regulation

Consumers must control their behavior to reach their goals. That is, successful goal pursuit requires effective self-regulation. The term *regulation* implies that some process controls and alters the thoughts and acts a person has; in a consumption setting, the consumer regulates her- or himself in the direction of a certain goal or desired state (Papies and Aarts 2011). The term *self-regulation* emphasizes that in this process the self is the actor that exerts control over the self (Baumeister 1998; James 1890). Self-regulation thus is a purposive mechanism through

[1] The empirical studies presented in this dissertation result from collaborative research efforts. Each chapter is written to support an independent reading, so some overlap occurs across parts of the chapters.

which self-corrective adjustments take place, in the service of goal attainment, and corrective adjustments originate within the person (Carver and Scheier 1998).

The process of self-regulation can be conceptualized as a process for reducing discrepancies between the current and a desired state (Austin and Vancouver 1996; Carver and Scheier 1998). As defined by the acronym TOTE (Miller, Galanter, and Pribram 1960), self-regulation starts with a *test* phase to compare the distance between the current state and some desired state. If the test is negative, people feel motivated to close the gap and perform an *operation*. The *test* then recurs. If the outcome is still negative, the cycle loops again, but when the desired state is reached, the person *exits* and terminates any goal-directed actions.

1.2 | Implicit Versus Deliberate Self-Regulation

Classic models of self-regulation define it as the ability to *intentionally* and *consciously* control behavior (i.e., operation) in the direction of the goal (Mischel, Shoda, and Rodriguez 1989; Strack and Deutsch 2004). For example, Carver and Scheier's (1998) influential self-regulatory model posits that consumers must be consciously aware of a discrepancy between their current and desired states, which leads them to intentionally perform an action to reduce the discrepancy. In these models, conscious choices permeate self-regulation and goal pursuit, as essential mediating variables.

I build on other research that suggests a reconsideration of this deliberate process view of self-regulation, because conscious decisions and actions appear neither typical nor necessary for effective goal pursuit and self-regulation (see also Fitzsimons and Bargh 2004; Förster and Jostmann 2012; Papies and Aarts 2011). People seem capable of managing their goal-directed behavior on a moment-to-moment basis, without necessarily guiding their own actions consciously (Bargh 1990; Bargh and Gollwitzer 1994). For instance, picture yourself at the counter of a supermarket with a full shopping cart. Would you still remember for all products why you made the decision to buy them and put them in your cart? For most items you probably would, but other choices will be blank and were not the result of much deliberate information processing. Current evidence indeed suggests that consumers often lack access to the mental processes that drive their own complex behavior, and that they can perform self-regulatory activities as if they had been chosen consciously (Aarts 2007; Chartrand and Bargh 1996). In such cases, consumers likely recognize the outcome of their actions without knowing *why* or even *that* they executed goal-directed behaviors.

This view parallels contemporary dual-process models, which contrast implicit (or nonconscious, automatic, or impulsive) with deliberate (also known as controlled, conscious, explicit, or reflective) processes (Chaiken and Trope 1999; Strack and Deutsch 2004). Deliberate processing requires effort, is intentional, and is driven by explicit goals. Implicit processing instead is initiated by (unconscious) registration of sensory input that shapes other

psychological processes. Anecdotal evidence reveals that people can perform well-practiced behavioral routines automatically, such as when driving a car, and still have free capacities available to enjoy the ride, listen to music, and plan what to eat for dinner. However, researchers are reluctant to predict similar capacities when people engage in higher level functions, such as goal pursuit or self-regulation. To the extent that consumers perform such processes without conscious awareness, a blanket assumption that consumers deliberately scrutinize goal-directed choices and actions leads to an incomplete picture of consumer behavior in situ.

Thus, I seek to expand the consideration of implicit self-regulation beyond routines to the operation of higher level processes such as goal pursuit. In contrast with widespread assumptions that self-regulation is a volitional process and that only simple or well-practiced skills can be executed implicitly, I contend that more complex actions, such as self-regulation in consumer goal pursuit, also can be performed without demanding conscious awareness. That is, consumers can guide complex, goal-directed choices and actions in a highly efficient and flexible fashion, without knowing why or even that they have executed such behaviors.

1.3 | Inter-Versus Extrapersonal Factors and Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is affected by both intrapersonal and extrapersonal factors, though most self-regulation research has focused primarily on understanding how intrapersonal factors promote successful goal pursuit, such as individual differences in the ability to delay gratification (Mischel, Shoda, and Rodriguez 1989) or self-regulatory strength (Baumeister et al. 1998). The ubiquity of goal pursuit in everyday life, and the vast number of self-regulation acts that occur in consumer contexts, makes it surprising that research has largely neglected the effect of extrapersonal, situational factors on consumer goal pursuit. Moreover, if self-regulation can be performed implicitly, external cues may have a crucial function in regulating consumer goal pursuit, such that when consumers try to attain their goals in a non-volitional manner, they likely exhibit responsiveness to the environment in which they pursue their goals and are open to cues that automatically initiate and support goal-directed actions. To illustrate this, let us go back to the supermarket example. If some products ended up in your shopping cart without you consciously and intentionally chosing them, it is very likely that extrapersonal factors may have played an essential role in guiding your shopping behavior. Maybe you hardly ever buy Snickers, but activated the poster with the text "Hungry? Grab a Snickers!" the goal of buying this snack, and made the extra reward points you received with Coca Cola buy you one bottle more than intended.

A growing interest focuses on whether and how extrapersonal factors and environmental stimuli affect self-regulation (Baumeister et al. 2005; Fitzsimons and Bargh 2003). These studies suggest that situational characteristics including marketing cues, such as brand names and logos, strongly influence self-regulatory processes (Chartrand et al. 2008; Fitzsimons, Chartrand, and

Fitzsimons 2008). An apt illustration is a recent study that shows that drinking a liquid branded as Gatorade – which promises better athletic performance – makes people perform better in an exercise, apparently because it boosted their confidence in their own abilities to close the gap between their current and desired state (i.e., performing well; Park and Roedder John 2014). Yet the participants in this study, even if they were aware of the marketing cue, were not aware of how it affected them. Although the environmental cue was in plain view and affected consumers' choices and behavior, they did not recognize its influence or acknowledge that the marketing cue supported self-regulation.

Overall then, these studies suggest that both intrapersonal factors and also subtle, omnipresent, extrapersonal cues all affect self-regulation, and situational factors can trigger and support successful goal pursuit. Moreover, they show that the consumer behavior sphere offers an ideal research context in which to test the role of situational factors on implicit self-regulation, and whether such effects apply to the real world, because consumer research focuses on the (nonconscious) influence of environmental factors (e.g., marketing cues) on consumers' thinking and doing. This dissertation explores this notion more extensively.

In summary, I view self-regulation as a product of the interaction between the consumer and the consumer context, rather than a product of either personal characteristics of the consumer or situational factors in isolation. Environmental stimuli can trigger goals and support self-regulatory processes that then go on to shape consumers' behavior in ways beyond their conscious awareness. Although there is reason to believe that situational characteristics affect self-regulatory processes and that self-regulation can occur implicitly, with this dissertation I seek to combine these observations and thereby contribute to extant literature by showing why and how the consumer context – and specifically situational, extrapersonal factors in the retail environment (e.g., marketing cues) – affect implicit self-regulatory processes in consumer goal pursuit. I argue that this process occurs in all domains of self-regulation in which consumers control their behaviors to attain a desired state.

1.4 | Three Domains of Self-Regulation

Because I aim to highlight the considerable array of domains in which self-regulatory processes drive various forms of consumer goal pursuit, I reviewed theoretical and empirical literature to identify three domains in which people engage in self-regulatory actions and which represent comprehensive coverage of important self-regulation domains (Heine, Proulx, and Vohs 2006; Janoff-Bulman 1989). As noted previously, these realms broadly comprise (a) the self in relation to time and space, (b) the self in relation to the physical world, and (c) the self in relation to itself. The three empirical chapters that constitute the body of this dissertation correspond to these three domains, each focusing on a different key domain of self-regulation. Specifically, I investigate how consumers' representation of (spatial and temporal) distance (Chapter 2), need

for an ordered and structured world (Chapter 3), and need for a favorable self-view (Chapter 4) shape, and are shaped by, extrapersonal factors in a consumer context, as well as how they interact to guide implicit self-regulatory processes in consumer goal pursuit. In these three domains, I highlight the role of progress information (Chapter 2), store atmospherics (Chapter 3), and brands (Chapter 4) as environmental factors that trigger and support self-regulation and goal pursuit (Figure 1.1).

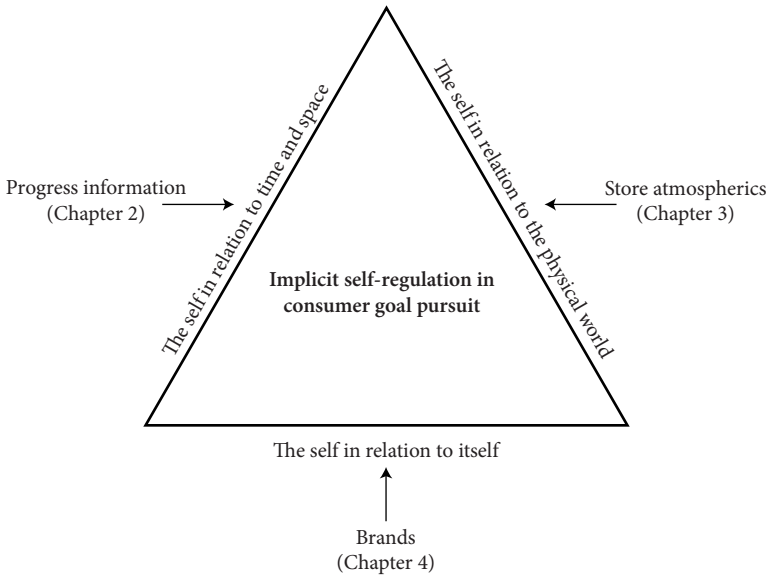

Figure 1.1 | Three domains of self-regulation and the role of extrapersonal factors for goal pursuit.

1.4.1 | Domain 1: The Self in Relation to Time and Space

In Chapter 2 I present self-regulation as a reflective process of feedback control situating behavior in time and space. Goal pursuit unfolds over time and space. When pursuing a goal, people need to monitor their progress by relating their current state to an initial state, removed from the present, and some future desired state that is not yet attained, both of which are distant from the here and now (Locke and Latham 1990). According to construal level theory, this aspect of distance largely guides self-regulation (Liberman and Trope 1998; Trope and Liberman 2010). If a person tries to resist a temptation now, such as eating a chocolate chip cookie, it helps if he or she can relate the current act of resisting temptation to a weight loss goal that has not yet been attained and is distant from the here and now (Fujita 2008). Construal level theory also holds that to be able to relate such proximal information to a distal state and see beyond the present state, people need an abstract rather than a concrete mindset (Dhar and Kim 2007; Trope and Liberman 2010).

On the basis of these findings, I propose that information about progress (e.g., number of credits collected in a reward program) toward distal states removed from the present (e.g., reward attainment) will be a function of consumers' construal level. The effect of progress information on motivation thus should be stronger among consumers with an abstract rather than a concrete mindset.

Moreover, I look at the interplay between construal level and the framing of progress information – as either the distance from the initial to the current state or the distance between the current state and the desired state – when consumers are halfway toward their goal (Carver and Scheier 1998; Koo and Fishbach 2008). Both frames imply the other (e.g., in a reward program in which consumers must collect ten credits, five credits collected means five more credits to go) and thus are logically equivalent, yet in specific conditions progress framing, even if consumers are exactly halfway toward their goal, should be consequential for motivation. Research on construal level has shown that an abstract mindset causes people to move beyond the here and now and perceive psychological distances as greater than they would if the construal level were concrete (Libermanet al. 2007; Liberman and Förster 2009). By implication, an abstract mindset encourages a biased overestimation of distances to states removed from the here and now, compared with a concrete mindset.

Due to this overestimation bias among people with an abstract mindset, I expect a directional effect of progress framing, such that equal progress from the initial and toward the desired state leads to higher and lower levels of motivation, respectively. In addition, I examine the interplay of progress framing and construal level at the beginning and end of the goal striving process. Three studies provide support for these predictions, as well as insights into how the implicit bias in the estimation of spatial and temporal distance interacts with progress framing to guide self-regulation and goal pursuit. More specifically, they show at which phase in goal pursuit self-regulation benefits most from various types of progress information.

1.4.2 | Domain 2: The Self in Relation to the Physical World

In Chapter 3 I present self-regulation as a reflective process of feedback control situating behavior in the physical world. Perceiving the world as an ordered, structured place is one of the highest goals people have (Heine, Proulx, and Vohs 2006; Kay et al. 2008; Kruglanski 1989; Landau et al. 2004). Perceiving disorder and chaos is threatening and evokes an aversive state, activating self-regulatory processes to close the gap between the current state and a desired state. Ideally, people respond by directly confronting the threat posed by the initial source, but it is not always feasible (e.g., terrorist attacks, natural disaster), so people also rely on compensatory sources of order (Antonovsky 1979; Kay et al. 2008). Recent work mainly focuses on extreme, irrational strategies to which people resort to regain their sense of order. For example, a threat to order encourages people to perceive illusory patterns in grainy images (Whitson and Galinsky 2008) and believe in an interventionist God (Kay et al. 2008).

Because perceiving the world as an ordered place is a fundamental human need and disorder threats are so omnipresent in physical environments, I predict mere goal pursuit provides a sense of order by establishing salient anchors or reference points that reduce perceptions of disorder and randomness; there is no other more typical and mundane route by which people can restore a sense of order. Goal pursuit provides structure because it reminds consumers of where they are now, whence they come, what they are pursuing, what gap they still have to cover, and the actions needed to reach the desired state (Baumgartner and Pieters 2008; Skinner 1996). If exposure to disorder, rather than order, increases the need for order, or the need to regain a sense of order, and if pursuing goals is an effective way to reaffirm that experience, people should show an increased tendency to set and pursue goals after they receive a disorder cue.

To illustrate the influence of extrapersonal factors on self-regulation, I focus on disorder cues in retail environments – including a disordered store layout, environmental noise, and (social and visual) clutter – that induce a sense of chaos and disorder. Furthermore, to illustrate my proposition that extrapersonal factors in the retail environment can support self-regulatory processes, I address goal-directed consumer behavior in a customer reward program as a means to provide a sense of order.

The four studies in Chapter 3 support these predictions and thereby introduce an overlooked, implicit, self-regulatory process by which consumers can remedy their perceptions of disorder, through their goal to reaffirm perceptions that the world is not ruled by randomness, which benefits goal pursuit efforts.

1.4.3 | Domain 3: The Self in Relation to Itself

In Chapter 4 I present self-regulation as a reflective process of feedback control situating behavior in relation to the self. The need to feel good about oneself is another fundamental human need and one of the most abstract goals people have (Baumeister 1989; Schmitt and Allik 2005). To build and maintain a positive self-view, people continuously monitor their environment – even on a nonconscious level – for self-relevant cues that provide information about how they should feel about themselves (Weisbuch et al. 2009). To assess their self-worth, they compare the outcome of this evaluation against some standard. A discrepancy in this comparison of how they are doing and their desired or acceptable state triggers self-regulatory processes to maintain or enhance self-esteem (Kruger and Dunning 1999; Sherman and Cohen 2006).

Brands might influence this self-esteem regulation. I explore how the evaluation of brand names that start with 'I' or 'my' (e.g., iPhone, MySpace) might depend on the valence of consumers' self-view. This approach builds on work that suggests people feel implicitly attracted to objects, events, and entities that seem connected to the self (Pelham, Mirenberg, and Jones 2005). For example, people enjoy self-associated objects to such an extent that they prefer letters in their names to any other letter of the alphabet (Nuttin 1985). This so-called name letter effect even extends to liking of (fictitious) brand names whose first letters match letters in the consumer's own name (Brendl et al. 2005).

On the basis of this reasoning, I argue that biased evaluations of self-associated brands are not limited to such incidental similarities but also extend to more generic references to the self in brand names. Therefore, generic self-referencing terms such as 'I' and 'my' in brand names may function as a self-cue and nonconsciously affect brand evaluations.

Moreover, I examine how and when this positive evaluation bias may boomerang and transform attraction into avoidance, or at least an unfavorable brand evaluation. Prior work on the evaluation bias assumes that the attraction effect results from people's default positive self-view, which spills over to any target that can be associated with the self (Gawronski, Bodenhausen, and Becker 2007; Greenwald and Banaji 1995). If the evaluation bias in brand judgment truly constitutes a reflection of the self's valence though, then both positive and negative self-evaluations should spill over to the self-associated target and result in a negative bias. I explore whether this avoidance effect gets better articulated under conditions of acute negative self-esteem (i.e., after self-threat) or for brands of products that are self-relevant (e.g., watch vs. bottle of water).

Five studies support these predictions, providing a fuller understanding of how brands can help regulate consumers' selves. Consumers implicitly feel attracted to generic self-referencing brands if they enhance consumers' self-view but avoid generic self-referencing brands if they reflect negatively on the consumers' selves.

1.5 | Present Dissertation

To recapitulate, the current dissertation presents research on implicit self-regulatory processes in goal-directed consumer behavior. This work contributes to extant literature by showing why and how the consumer context, and especially situational factors in the retail environment, affect implicit self-regulatory processes when consumers pursue goals. Together, the three chapters examine three different, exclusive domains of self-regulation, attesting to the generality of the findings. In the first empirical chapter, I present findings about the effect of construal level and progress information on motivated goal pursuit. In Chapter 3, I focus more specifically on the effect of environmental disorder on goal pursuit, as well as how goal striving provides a means to restore feelings of order. The studies in Chapter 4 address consumers' uses of self-referencing brands to maintain and enhance their favorable self-view. The final chapter of this dissertation summarizes and discusses the main empirical results and draws some overarching conclusions; it also describes the theoretical and managerial relevance and implications of the three main studies, along with suggestions for further research on implicit self-regulation and consumer goal pursuit.